

12 Coaching Strategies to Support Positive Youth Development

A PRACTICE GUIDE FOR YOUTH COACHES



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Introduction

Extensive research and practical wisdom indicate that coaches have an incredible opportunity to shape the lives of young athletes. The role of coaches goes beyond teaching the technical and tactical aspects of sport.

Coaches have the power to foster positive youth development and make a lasting impact on young people's lives.

A history of research demonstrates the power of youth sport in promoting many different positive youth development outcomes, both within sport **and** in life beyond sport.^{1,2,3} Participation in youth sport can lead to the development of positive social relationships, motivation, leadership skills, improved mental health, and better academic performance.^{1,3,4,5,6} However, there is also evidence that sport can have negative effects, such as increased anxiety and problem behaviors, on young people.²



The key is that positive youth development doesn't just happen by accident.

It's not **only** about playing a sport. It's about the sport environment, how young athletes are engaged (or not) during practice, and what young people experience during games and competition.^{3,7,8} **Coaches play a crucial role in making young people's experiences positive and a catalyst for the development of different sport and life skills.**^{8,9,10}



What do we mean when we say “positive youth development?”

We use this term to refer to an approach designed to help young people grow into confident, responsible, and healthy individuals by creating safe and supportive environments, building their skills, and fostering strong relationships so that they can thrive. “Positive youth development” practices often span different fields, approaches, strategies, and frameworks, including but not limited to positive youth development, social and emotional learning, life skills, positive climate, mental health and well-being, trauma-informed or trauma-responsive care, healing-centered sport, and more.

Here's the thing: **Coaches need support, too.** That is why 18 different youth sport organizations, leagues, state councils and high school associations, funders, researchers, and coach developers have all come together to form the **Million Coaches Challenge** (MCC), built around the shared belief that coaches trained in evidence-based youth development and skill-building practices are essential for creating quality sport experiences that meet young people's physical, mental, and emotional needs.

The MCC partner organizations have developed more than 40 different trainings and have trained one million coaches in practices that support positive youth development.

Findings from an ongoing, multiyear **implementation study** of the Million Coaches Challenge have elevated 12 core coaching practices that are shared across most of the MCC partners' trainings. Prior research has shown that these core coaching practices enable positive outcomes for youth athletes and coaches.

MCC PARTNERS



Introducing the 12 Core Practice Areas

This guide is organized around **12 core practice areas** that emerged from the [MCC implementation study](#). These practice areas reflect what coaches are being asked to do in their day-to-day work with youth athletes. They showed up across most partner trainings and were described in ways that made them usable across sports, ages, and coaching contexts.

The order in which these practices are presented is intentional. It reflects widely accepted theories in positive youth development and a conceptual arc for coaching. Many of these ideas are also interconnected. In practice and in training content, they overlap or reinforce one another.

Although we don't present these 12 practice areas as a formal framework or set of categories, there are natural groupings:

SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR DEVELOPMENT:

1

Creating a Physically, Emotionally, and Psychologically Safe Environment

2

Building Trust and Developing Relationships

3

Showing Up With Consistency, Empathy, Attention, and Care

4

Fostering Belonging and Inclusion

5

Fostering Athlete Agency and Self-Empowerment

SUPPORTING ATHLETE LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT:

6

Creating a Mastery Climate that Values Effort, Growth, and Learning

7

Providing Effective Coaching and Instruction

8

Running Purposeful Practices and Scrimmages

9

Using Rituals to Building Connection and Reinforce Values

DOING THE INNER WORK OF COACHING:

10

Regulating Stress, Emotions, and Reactions as a Coach

11

Modeling and Staying Accountable to the Behaviors and Values Coaches Want Athletes to Develop

12

Committing to Personal and Professional Growth

About The Guide

This guide was created by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) in collaboration with the Million Coaches Challenge partner organizations, based on findings from an ongoing implementation study of the MCC.

We created this guide as a resource for coaches and their organizations to provide practical and actionable strategies for supporting positive youth development through sport. Our goal is to take what we are learning from the MCC and share our collective vision for integrating practices that foster positive youth development into coaching.

This guide may be a starting point or a stop along a coach's coaching journey.

These ideas may be new, or they may be used to expand practice. Wherever coaches are coming from, let's meet them there!

Each section lays out one of the 12 core coaching practice areas that **all** good coaches—no matter your sport, the age of your athletes, level of competition, or access to resources—should know about and be able to implement. For each practice, we share the following:

What it is

Why it matters

What it looks like in practice



Learn more about the
MCC Implementation Study
and how AIR® developed
this practice guide.

How to Use the Guide



This guide offers practical, easy-to-implement coaching practices that support positive youth development in sports and can complement and enhance existing training efforts.

While it's primarily geared toward coaches, it's also a valuable resource for sport leaders, athletes, and families. Each group plays a role in creating safe, inclusive, and growth-oriented environments.

This guide is not meant to replace formal training programs for coaches. Instead, it offers helpful insights into positive youth development practices and strategies that can complement and enhance existing training efforts.

It's important to note that **coaches are not and should not be expected to do everything in this guide all at once.** Some practices—like creating a physically and emotionally safe environment and building strong relationships—are foundational and nonnegotiable. They are well-established in the research on positive youth development and are covered in all the trainings offered by the Million Coaches Challenge partner organizations. These practices must be in place if coaches are to implement other practices effectively. Then, coaches may prioritize additional practices based on local context, the team's needs, and each coach's own areas for growth. Use this guide as a roadmap. Start where coaches are, choose one or two areas to focus on, and build over time. The goal is progress, not perfection.

Sport Leaders

Sports leaders (e.g., athletic directors, league presidents) are responsible for shaping the policies and systems influencing the athletic experience. Sports leaders can use this guide to do the following:

- **Align Policies and Practices:**

Reflect on how well your existing policies support the coaching practices described in this guide. Identify areas of strength and opportunities for better alignment.

.....
Example:

If athlete safety is a priority and coaches are expected to maintain proper equipment, is there a clear system for distributing supplies or requesting replacements? If so, how are coaches informed? If not, what process could be put in place?

- **Set Clear Expectations for Coaches:**

Share the guide with coaches and communicate clearly about the practices you expect them to implement. Let them know what support is available—such as training sessions or feedback opportunities.

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Example:

Host a season kickoff with coaches to introduce the guide and facilitate discussion about expectations and strategies for using the practices.

- **Support Ongoing Coach Education and Development:**

Offer training and development opportunities that deepen coaches' understanding of the practices. Each section includes links to coach trainings and resources to learn more.

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Example:

Organize a community of practice where coaches use the guide to reflect and share experiences. To further support a practice—like creating a mastery climate—offer targeted training or partner with an external organization.

- **Observe and Provide Feedback:**

Implement systems to observe coaches at practices and games. Use those observations to guide feedback and reflection.

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Example:

Develop a simple rubric aligned to the practices. Invite peer observations and follow-up conversations to support continuous improvement.

Coaches and Staff

Coaches and staff work directly with athletes and shape their everyday experiences. Coaches and staff can use this guide to do the following:

- **Reflect on Your Coaching Practice:**

Read through the 12 practices. For each one, coaches can ask the following:

- Where and how does this align with my coaching philosophy?
- What am I doing well?
- What could I improve?
- What do I need to learn more about?

Coaches can then identify one or two practices to focus on, make a plan, and revisit it over time.

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Example:

A coach wants to better support athlete agency. They decide to integrate two athlete-led elements into each practice and carve out time in closing circle for athlete reflection. The coach reviews this plan with their coaching partner, and they identify how to support athletes to step into leadership roles.

- **Pursue Professional Growth:**

Coaches can use the guide to pinpoint areas of growth and learning. This could include reading a book, attending a workshop, observing another coach, or taking an online course. We have linked to aligned MCC partner resources in each section of this practice guide.

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Example:

A high school girls' lacrosse coach wants to increase their athletes' sense of belonging on the team. The coach attends a training on creating team culture and relationship-building and reads up on best practices to adapt their training sessions accordingly.

- **Find an Accountability Partner:**

Growth takes intention and consistency. Coaches should share identified goals with someone—like a co-coach or athlete—and ask them for help to stay accountable to the goals.

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Example:

A youth soccer coach is working on emotional regulation. They ask their coaching partner to signal to them when emotions are running high and debrief weekly on what their coaching partner noticed and how they responded.

Athletes and Families

Athletes and families play an essential role in creating supportive, growth-oriented environments. Athletes and families can use this guide in the following ways:

- **Reflect on Roles:**

Review the practices and consider how athlete and family actions can support the practices. Identify one or two areas to focus on.

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Example:

A high school baseball athlete wants to build belonging on their team. During partner activities, they seek out teammates they don't know well and make an effort to connect.

.....
Example:

A parent wants to support a mastery climate—an environment where the focus is on effort, learning, and personal growth rather than on outcomes like winning. After games, they shift conversations with their athlete to highlight how they worked hard, improved a skill, or supported teammates.

- **Engage in Conversations for Collective Improvement:**

Athletes deserve environments that nurture their development. The practices can be used to initiate conversations about how things are going and how they can improve.

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Example:

An athlete and caregiver review the guide and notice inconsistency across the league. They make a plan to:

- Talk with teammates and families about showing up consistently and why it matters;
- Talk with coaches about reinforcing the expectations the team set together; and
- Meet with the league president to advocate for clearer communication, consistent safety procedures, and reliable equipment at all locations.





What It Is

Coaches are responsible for implementing practices and systems that support athletes' physical, emotional, and psychological safety.

- **Physical safety** focuses on preventing injury and physical harm. It includes injury prevention practices like managing fields and facilities, teaching foundational technical skills, and providing adequate rest and recovery time.
- **Emotional safety** means ensuring youth athletes feel accepted and valued for who they are.
- **Psychological safety** means youth athletes feel free and safe to be themselves, speak up, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of being judged or punished. In other words, athlete safety is holistic—it creates a foundation to support positive youth development and sport-specific practices and skill-building opportunities.

Safety is the floor—not the ceiling.

Why It Matters

Supporting a young person's physical, emotional, and psychological safety is foundational for positive youth development.¹¹ When coaches are intentional about supporting athlete safety, they create an environment where athletes can learn new skills, connect with their teammates, take positive risks, and feel a sense of belonging and enjoyment.^{12,13} Centering athlete safety also reduces the risk of injury from overuse or misuse, which can keep athletes healthy and engaged in sports.

What It Looks Like in Practice

CREATING A PHYSICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Coaches should do the following:

- Ensure the team has the proper equipment and safety supplies and that these are checked regularly to ensure they are functioning correctly.
- Understand and implement proper conditioning, technique, form, and training to reduce the risk of injury.
- Encourage youth athletes to take care of their bodies by giving instruction and modeling what that looks like as a coach.
- Supervise youth athletes and pay attention to those who may need support or are struggling to avoid risks or injuries.
- Provide developmentally appropriate and sport-specific rest and recovery time for all athletes.
- Prevent abuse and misconduct by completing specific trainings, undergoing background checks, and adopting policies that ensure youth safety.
- Have a plan for all practices, scrimmages, games, and competitions.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From How to Coach Kids:

→ Planning a safe practice starts with the ABCs of warm-ups.

Ability

Balance

Coordination

CREATING AN EMOTIONALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Coaches should do the following:

- Ask questions and engage in conversation with youth athletes to learn more about their interests and life beyond the sport.
- Create an environment characterized by empathy, gratitude, and kindness toward all.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From USA Weightlifting:

- ➔ Welcome all youth athletes with a smile and a warm greeting as they arrive to practice, scrimmages, games, and competitions.



From Positive Coaching Alliance:

- ➔ Integrate opportunities to fill youth athletes' "emotional tanks."
 - Aim for the magic ratio of 5 "tank fillers" to 1 "tank drainer."
 - Connection, safety, and belonging fill tanks.
 - Incorporate fun activities that honor athletes like a winner's circle or teammates sharing appreciation with each other.



- Co-develop their team code with athletes.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From U.S. Soccer Foundation:

Co-creating a team code helps set shared expectations and ensures everyone feels safe, respected, and included. Here's how to build one together.

- ➔ Your team code can include three rules or boundaries that are most important to your team.
- ➔ Ask:
 - What do we need to feel safe?
 - What rules or boundaries are most important to us?
- ➔ Ensure your team code is
 - clear
 - fair
 - manageable
 - avoids "no" and "never" ("no interrupting" becomes "one person shares at a time")
- ➔ Once you create your team code, be sure to reinforce and model it.

- Provide opportunities for youth athletes to share their experiences, feelings, and ideas.
- Honor the different ways athletes show up, acknowledging all types of contributions.
- Build in cool downs after competitions and scrimmages to allow an opportunity to lower emotional intensity and connect as a team.



What It Is

The act of intentionally building trust and developing relationships is foundational to the work of coaching and a necessary component of ensuring athlete safety, creating a mastery climate, empowering athletes, and building their skills—many of the practices described in this guide. Building trust means coaches consistently show youth athletes that they can be counted on. Relationship development between coaches and youth athletes means coaches get to know youth athletes as people and show that they care about them beyond their athletic skills and performance. It also includes creating opportunities for youth athletes to form positive relationships with each other.

Why It Matters

A caring adult, like a coach, is a key ingredient in helping youth buffer the effects of stress and build resilience.¹⁴ When coaches intentionally build trust with athletes, it creates the foundation for helping them develop important skills, build relationships, and feel a sense of belonging.^{15,16,17,18} Similarly, positive peer relationships play a critical role in enhancing motivation, sense of belonging, and social development.¹⁹

What It Looks Like in Practice

BUILDING TRUST

Coaches should do the following:

- Follow through on commitments every time.
- Discuss mistakes and share reasoning or thinking transparently and debrief mistakes as a team, not individual failures.
- Coaches show up consistently and predictably so youth athletes learn that they are reliable.
- Create structured, low-pressure mechanisms for youth to share feedback or discuss sensitive issues privately—create an anonymous comment box (physical or digital) or offer open-office time or a quiet corner during practice.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From LiFEsports at The Ohio State University and the Ohio High School Athletic Association:

- Coaches and athletes can build trust by **BRAVING***:
- **Boundaries:** Setting and respecting one another's boundaries and saying no where necessary.
 - **Reliability:** Committing to doing what you say you will do and being consistent.
 - **Accountability:** Owning up to mistakes and apologizing.
 - **Vault:** Making sure you do not share information that isn't yours to share (keep it in the "vault").
 - **Integrity:** Choosing courage over comfort and practicing your values versus just stating them.
 - **Non-judgment:** Cultivating an environment where youth are accepted, and challenges are met with empathy.
 - **Generosity:** Extending the most generous interpretation possible to the actions and words of others.

* Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to lead: Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts.* Random House.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



UNITED STATES
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC
COMMITTEE

From the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC):

- ➔ Balance between connecting from the heart and from the head. Athletes will have a different balance of what type of connections they need to build trust, so pay attention to how they respond and consistently find opportunities to connect.



From the heart:

showing you care and supporting their emotional development



From the head:

teaching and challenging their technical skills

DEVELOPING COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIPS

Coaches can build relationships with youth athletes by implementing these suggestions:

- Greet all athletes as they arrive for practices, scrimmages, games, and competitions.
- Use athletes' preferred names during your interactions with them.
- Ask questions and engage in short conversations to learn more about athletes' interests and ideas.
- Share power with athletes, providing them with meaningful opportunities to use their voice and share in decision-making (find more examples in fostering agency and self-empowerment!).

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport:

- ➔ Display unconditional positive regard—the idea that no matter what, you believe in and care for your athletes and want them to be a part of the team. It means separating who they are as a person from their behavior or skill level. While there may be behaviors that need to be addressed and worked through together, that does not affect their worth or your care for them.

SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG ATHLETES AS A TEAM

Coaches can follow these tips for helping to foster relationships among their players:

- Make it a norm for all athletes to greet each other as they arrive to practice, scrimmages, games, and competitions.
- Use a variety of different grouping strategies during practice so all athletes have an opportunity to get to know each other and so no athletes are excluded.
 - ➔ Create groups based on shared likes and interests (favorite foods, taste in music).
 - ➔ Pair new athletes with more experienced athletes.
 - ➔ Assign players random numbers to create mixed groups.
- Integrate structured ice breakers and team conversations into times when the team is together so athletes learn more about each other and find things in common.
- Create opportunities during practice that allow for light conversation while also working on conditioning or sport-specific skills.
- Create opportunities for group celebration—bond over the big and the small victories together as a team.
- Encourage athletes to spend time together on a nonsport-related activity so they can get to know each other on a personal level.
- Carve out time for athletes to connect informally, where they get to talk and connect with each other.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Girls on the Run International:

- ➔ Encourage relationships between teammates:
 - **Notice and respond:** Pay attention to make sure everyone is included. If you notice someone is being left out, intervene in a positive manner to help them get involved.
 - **Pair strategically:** Group youth by similarities or differences—like grade, interests, or experience—to support connection.
 - **Foster new relationships:** Encourage youth to engage with peers they don't already know to build new connections.



What It Is

The way coaches show up—day in and day out—deeply influences how athletes experience their team and themselves. This includes being consistent and predictable, demonstrating to athletes that coaches will always show up as promised, establishing a clear routine for practices and games so athletes know what to expect, and upholding values and agreements consistently to foster trust and stability within the team environment.

In addition, when coaches demonstrate empathy by validating athletes' emotions and perspectives, offer their full attention by being mentally and emotionally present, and show care by making athletes feel seen, supported, and valued, they create a safe and supportive environment for connection and skill-building. These ways of showing up are not just important on their own—they also set the stage for many other core coaching practices. For instance, when a coach leads with empathy, it helps build the trust that's essential for strong relationships and a positive team culture.

Why It Matters

How coaches show up shapes athletes' experiences and development. Being present and consistent, leading with empathy, and showing athletes they are valued are foundational practices in positive youth development.^{20,21,22,23} These qualities help build trusting relationships, foster a sense of belonging, and create a supportive environment where young athletes can grow on and off the field.^{24,25,26}

What It Looks Like in Practice

BEING PREDICTABLE AND CONSISTENT

Coaches should:

- Show up on time, starting and ending practice on time.
- Co-create and maintain clear team agreements for behavior and conduct.
- Provide structure and routine during all aspects of practices, competitions, and games.
- Be consistent in how they set up spaces so players know what to do and where to go.

HAVING EMPATHY AND VALIDATING ATHLETE EMOTIONS AND EXPRESSIONS

Coaches should implement the following suggestions:

- Consider athletes' perspectives in the moment and put their feelings first.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From U.S. Soccer Foundation:

Start by checking in with yourself. When athletes act out or seem distant, it's usually not a reflection of you as a coach—it's a sign that something important to them might be missing. These moments are chances to listen with empathy and respond with care.

Quit

Taking

It

Personally



Showing Up With Consistency, Empathy, Attention, and Care

- Identify and accommodate athlete emotions rather than invalidating them—for example, if an athlete seems frustrated with their performance, a coach might say, “I can see you’re disappointed; it’s okay to feel that way. Let’s focus on improving next time” which validates emotions and fosters a supportive environment. Consider athletes’ perspectives in the moment and put their feelings first.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Positive Coaching Alliance:

- ➔ Create an empathy **PACT** with youth every day
 - **Perspective (look, listen):** Identify what emotions and behaviors players show, listen to understand.
 - **Align (breathe, believe):** Take a deep breath to re-center and re-focus, believe what youth are saying by validating.
 - **Connect (confirm, care):** Confirm what youth are feeling, demonstrate caring as an expression of understanding.
 - **Think (reflect, recognize):** Reflect on interactions after practices and games, recognize where to improve.

- Be aware of stress on athletes.
- Engage in perspective taking to better understand what athletes may be experiencing—do this by listening attentively, asking questions, and empathizing or acknowledging their feelings.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From USA Weightlifting:

- ➔ Use phrases like “help me understand,” and put yourself in athletes’ shoes.

GIVING ATHLETES FULL ATTENTION AND BEING PRESENT

Coaches can do the following:

- Be prepared; have plans ready and mentally prepare beforehand.
- Give full attention to athletes.
- Participate with athletes.
- Be mindful of body language, space, and tone.
- Project joy, show enthusiasm, and be positive.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



UNITED STATES
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC
COMMITTEE

From the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC):

- ➔ Take time to reflect on your “why” as a coach. This can help center you in how you show up and are present with your athletes.
 - Print and hang your WHY someplace where you will see it every day.
 - Print and hang your WHY in your practice space to remind yourself and others of what matters to you.
 - Make your WHY the home screen on your phone.
 - Set an alarm 10 minutes before every practice or competition to remind yourself of your WHY.
 - Share your WHY with other coaches and your players and families; consistently check-in to be sure you are showing up how you intent.
 - Ask others to keep you accountable to coaching from your WHY.
 - Publish your WHY in any written or electronic communication.

SHOWING ATHLETES THEY ARE VALUED AND CARED FOR

Coaches can show athletes they are valued and cared for by:

- Taking a strength-based approach with athletes that honors and upholds their value by focusing on their assets—what makes them unique, their skills and abilities, and their potential.
- Using language that shows athletes their lived experiences matter—for example, incorporating personal anecdotes during team meetings or one-on-one conversations to highlight individual journeys and achievements.
- Acknowledging athletes' contributions to discussions.
- Emphasizing sportsmanship and respect for all.





What It Is

Fostering belonging and inclusion creates an environment that allows athletes to feel like they can fully be themselves and are recognized as valued members of the team. This means intentionally building a team culture where every athlete feels supported and celebrated. Many of the other coaching practices, like supporting emotional safety and building relationships, can help build and reinforce a sense of belonging and inclusion. Although some practices are geared toward all athletes, other practices support specific populations of athletes, including girls and youth with disabilities, and align with their unique strengths and needs. Creating an environment where athletes experience a sense of belonging and inclusion supports growth and positive youth development in their sport and beyond.

Why It Matters

Belonging is a fundamental human need across the lifespan and is linked to positive life outcomes, such as positive social relationships, academic and career success, and improved physical and mental health.²⁷ Coaches play a key role in fostering inclusive environments where athletes feel they truly belong. A sense of belonging fosters engagement in the sport, supporting positive peer relationships and skill development.^{28,29,30,31}



What It Looks Like in Practice

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE TEAM ENVIRONMENT

There are multiple ways coaches can create an inclusive team environment:

- Reflect on their own background and how it influences their coaching and interactions.
- Provide every athlete with an equal opportunity to develop their skills and learn new ones. Design practice activities that give all athletes time on task and have clear playing time rules that are communicated up front.
- Intervene when comments or actions limit athletes' ability to participate (this includes preventing bullying and toxic behavior).
- Use intentional language: Recognize that words matter and the things we say and don't say can send messages to kids about belonging.
- Call athletes by the name they want to be called.
- Use person-first language when referring to athletes with disabilities.*
- Refer to the team as "our team."

* Within the disability community, some people use person-first language (e.g., person with a disability), and some people use identity-first language (e.g., disabled person). Coaches should ask their athletes what language to use. Learn more here: [Why Person-First Language Doesn't Always Put the Person First](#).

4

Fostering Belonging and Inclusion

- Create a gender-inclusive space that welcomes all genders into sport.
 - ➔ If a participant would feel more comfortable or safe using a separate facility, help them figure out a comfortable and safe option.
 - ➔ Make sure girls' bathrooms are accessible and appropriately stocked and that garbage cans and hygiene products are accessible.
 - ➔ Find ways to help girls see pictures of adult role models in sport who can inspire them to envision what is possible.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Coaching Girls (How to Coach Kids):

- ➔ How do great coaches motivate girls?
 - **Build team relationships.** Being part of the team is one of the top reasons girls below the age of 12 play at all so encourage girls to celebrate each other and make time for them to connect at the end of practice.
 - **Have fun.** Choose age-appropriate activities, celebrate a lot, give kids choices, and make sure everyone plays.
 - **Reward effort and taking risks.** So often, girls are celebrated for being perfect. How about we celebrate their effort to be daring?





What It Is

Fostering agency and supporting athletes in realizing their personal and collective power is rooted in practices that encourage coaches to share power such that athletes can use their voices, make decisions, and take the lead. Creating opportunities for athletes to contribute meaningfully helps them feel a sense of responsibility to the team. This can strengthen team cohesion and support their personal growth.

Why It Matters

When coaches provide opportunities for athletes to make choices and lead, it can help athletes cultivate agency and self-empowerment—key drivers of motivation, engagement, and the development of essential life skills like responsible decision making and self-regulation.^{32,33,34} Agency and self-empowerment are powerful for athletes not only in their sport but in all areas of their lives.^{35,36}

What It Looks Like in Practice

FOSTERING ATHLETE AGENCY

Ways coaches can foster athlete agency include the following:

- Give athletes space to try things out, learn on their own, and display creativity.
- Create team expectations and agreements together.
- When setting up consistent spaces so players know what to do and where to go, offer options for players to set their own transition space.
- Let athletes call their own timeouts.
- Ask the team for feedback on what went well and what the moments of challenge were.

PROVIDING LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES AND SHARING POWER

Coaches can foster leadership in and share power with their players by:

- Creating opportunities for youth leadership and delegating roles and responsibilities:
 - ➔ Invite athletes to choose and lead warm-ups, activities, and games.
 - ➔ Have athletes referee their scrimmages or game play.
 - ➔ Ask athletes for their input on how to make teams.
 - ➔ Invite athletes' suggestions on how to change the rules of a game.

- Encouraging athletes to mentor each other.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Positive Coaching Alliance:

- ➔ **Buddy system:** With the buddy system, the players pair up before a practice, game, or specific drill—early on, you may want to create the pairs and, later on, let the players pick. Their assignment is to fill their partner's emotional tank throughout the drill or practice. At the end of the time, ask kids to share what the other did to fill their tank. They will learn from each other how to communicate in a positive manner and how to fill emotional tanks.



What It Is

Although competition is a part of sports, great coaching goes beyond winning. Creating a mastery climate means building a motivational environment where effort, improvement, and skill development take center stage. Coaches can celebrate persistence, treat mistakes as valuable learning moments, and support athletes in setting goals and reflecting on their progress. This approach requires intentionality—focusing on what athletes can control and recognizing growth in the process, not just the outcome.

Why It Matters

When people believe their ability is a result of their effort and practice rather than natural talent, they tend to have better performance over time.³⁷ As such, when coaches cultivate a mastery climate—where effort, learning, and growth are emphasized—they are helping athletes develop a growth mindset from which they are more likely to display a strong work ethic, dig deep in response to setbacks or challenging moments, and develop essential life skills.^{38,39,40} Finally, athletes may find the sport more rewarding as they find success in learning and giving their best effort, not just winning.⁴⁰ Building a sense of mastery also helps athletes build resilience and successfully navigate adversity.⁴¹

What It Looks Like in Practice

FOCUSING ON EFFORT

Coaches can emphasize effort by doing the following:

- Notice and celebrate effort and hustle separately from outcomes.
- Celebrate different types of contribution through situation-specific routines.
- Give effort-based feedback, like celebrating trying. Praise is especially powerful when an athlete gives great effort but does not get their desired result in that moment.
- Celebrate mistakes as learning opportunities.
 - ➔ Have a mistakes routine, like a physical gesture that athletes can use to remind themselves that mistakes are okay and get ready for the next play.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Positive Coaching Alliance:

➔ ELM Tree of Mastery

- **Effort:** Give your best, stay focused, find new strategies to overcome challenges.
- **Learning:** Build resilience, problem solve, reflect.
- **Mistakes:** Help you grow, setbacks are stepping stones to achieving your goals.



FOCUSING ON IMPROVEMENT AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Coaches can support skill development and improvement in the following ways:

- Set goals with athletes that focus on individual improvement.
- Emphasize success as being better today than yesterday.
- Celebrate and call out growth, reminding athletes how they improved.
- Give intentional praise that addresses something an athlete has control over. For example, an athlete can't control the final score of a game, but they can control putting themselves in position to take a shot on goal or make a great defensive block.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Girls on the Run International:

- ➔ Help your team set goals focused on individual improvement instead of comparison to others.
- ➔ Remind participants how they grew or improved.
- ➔ Ask 'How did you do that?' to reflect on effort and skill-building. Help participants identify something specific that contributed to their success.
- ➔ Use TLC Praise: TLC praise is a great way to let team members know what they're doing right. It's important to praise actions such as effort, improvement, and character that are specific to the actions being demonstrated. This is more impactful than just saying, "good job!"
 - Tell it: "You invited Jamie to join when she was alone."
 - Label it: "That shows kindness."
 - Celebrate it: "Awesome job including others!"



What It Is

Providing effective coaching and instruction is about the *pedagogy* of sport—the intentional ways coaches teach, guide, and interact with athletes to support both individual development and team connection. This includes how coaches explain skills, structure learning, respond to behavior, and provide feedback to promote growth and engagement. It also involves creating space for athlete reflection and development through thoughtful coaching conversations. When coaches are deliberate in how they teach and communicate, they help foster trust, support athlete safety, and strengthen the overall team environment.

Why It Matters

The way coaches teach, respond to behavior, and offer feedback plays a critical role in shaping athletes' development and experiences. When coaches adapt their approach to meet individual needs and respond with care, they promote skill growth, positive behavior, and a stronger sense of belonging and engagement.^{42,43,44,45,46} Supportive feedback can boost motivation, reinforce a mastery mindset, and help athletes feel seen.⁴³ In contrast, punitive responses like yelling, benching, or assigning physical punishment can harm athletes' sense of self, enjoyment, and connection to the sport—and may contribute to dropout.^{45,46} Coaching behaviors should be grounded in a commitment to fostering confidence, competence, connection, character, and enjoyment.⁴²

What It Looks Like in Practice

SUPPORTING POSITIVE TEAM ENGAGEMENT

Coaches can foster positive team engagement by taking these steps:

- Create expectations together as a team.
- Keep consequences short, sweet, and age appropriate.
- Consider different ways to respond to athlete behaviors that encourage positive engagement.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners

LiFEsports.
at The Ohio State University



From LiFEsports at The Ohio State University and the Ohio High School Athletic Association:

→ DRIVE

- **Define Expectations:** Work with players, parents, and coaches to define positive team-wide norms and rules (e.g., what is “onsides and offsides”).
- **Reward Positive Behaviors:** Encourage and acknowledge the demonstration of expected behaviors.
- **Implement feedback loops:** Direct guidance on what to do and/or how to do it and check for understanding (e.g., teach back). See page 37 for best practices on feedback.
- **Value:** Determine if youth value your behavior strategies/ positive rewards. If not, switch it up!
- **Evaluate:** Reflect on your team values, rewards, and feedback process. What is or isn’t working?



Quick Tips from MCC Partners

LiFEsports.
at The Ohio State University



From LiFEsports at The Ohio State University and the Ohio High School Athletic Association:

- ➔ **Behavior is a form of communication:** Use the ABCs to understand the functions of behavior.
 - **Antecedents:** What happens right before the behavior occurs (time of day, setting, people, activities)?
 - **Behavior:** What does the behavior tell us? What does that behavior look like, how long does it occur, how intense is it?
 - **Consequence:** What happens after the behavior occurred? What is the function of the behavior? What response does the athlete get from coaches and teammates, and what do they get to do or not do as a result?



From Girls on the Run International:

- ➔ **Co-create expectations:** Work with participants to develop a team agreement at the start of the season. Keep it visible or refer to it as needed, reminding the team they created and agreed to the expectations.

PROVIDING INSTRUCTION

Coaches can do the following:

- Provide clear instructions, keeping them simple and clear. Consider how to:
 - ➔ Show rather than tell by modeling instructions.
 - ➔ Pose problems rather than telling during instruction.
- Be ready to adapt and differentiate instruction to meet the needs of different athletes. This includes the ways coaches help athletes learn technical skills and other skills, like managing stress.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners**From How to Coach Kids:**

- ➔ **Change the Rules:** Ever wanted to change the rules? Now you can. Modify the rules of the game to maximize inclusion, intensity, and skill development. Here's an easy way to change things up: Use the "Rule of 3." You can change the rule by adding 3 of something. For example:
 - 3 passes before shooting a goal/basket
 - 3 second possession per person
 - 3 steps maximum
 - 3 feet between the defender and the ball
 - 3 feet boundary around the goal
 - 3 goal games



ENGAGING IN FEEDBACK AND COACHING CONVERSATION

The following steps help coaches engage players in feedback and coaching conversations:

- Consider when to give feedback.
 - ➔ Coaches should identify moments for learning and growth when athletes can hear them, like during a practice, when the pressure is low rather than during a game, when the energy and pressure is high.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners**From the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport:**

- ➔ **Build your bench.** Coming out of a game can be stressful. Leave two seats open next to the coach. If a player sits in the seat next to the coach, they are ready to talk; if they sit in the other seat, they are not ready to talk yet and will move to the other seat when they are ready.

- ➔ Seize teachable moments.
- ➔ To support mastery, give effort-based feedback, like celebrating trying (see the Mastery Climate section for more).





- Consider how they give feedback.
 - ➔ Connect with the athlete before jumping into feedback.
 - ➔ Be specific.
 - ➔ Connect feedback to life skills.
 - ➔ Focus on what they want athletes to do rather than what you they don't want them to do. For example, "Please listen when teammates are sharing" rather than "Stop talking when teammates are sharing."

Quick Tips from MCC Partners

LiFEsports.
at The Ohio State University



From LiFEsports at The Ohio State University and the Ohio High School Athletic Association:

- ➔ Implement feedback loops that are:
 - **Individualized:** Use player's name and direct your feedback to them.
 - **Specific:** Be specific with detail, explicitly defining what they are doing well or how they can improve.
 - **Immediate:** Provide feedback right after the behavior occurs, clearly connecting your comments to the specific action you observed.
 - **Frequent:** Offer feedback regularly to reinforce learning and growth, ensuring it becomes a consistent part of your interactions.
 - **Genuine:** Ensure the feedback has meaning and purpose behind it.



What It Is

Running purposeful practices and scrimmages starts with identifying both clear goals for the specific session and broader goals, like creating a safe environment, supporting athlete agency, and developing a mastery climate. Once the goals are defined, coaches can structure their practice,, tailoring a mix of consistent components, like warm-ups, skills and drills, free play, and scrimmaging. Coaches can also consider how they run these activities, thinking about how to make activities both fun and challenging, offering athletes opportunities to make choices and lead, and keeping athletes moving. Thoughtfully structured practices help athletes build skills and can contribute to athlete safety, relationships, mastery climate, and belonging and inclusion.

Why It Matters

When coaches intentionally structure practices and scrimmages around clear goals with the appropriate mix of fun and challenge, they can create a safe and supportive environment that helps athletes build skills, cultivate a growth mindset, and build team cohesion.^{47,48,49} When coaches intentionally integrate teaching life skills into practice and provide opportunities for athletes to practice these skills, it can positively affect the supportive environment and athlete engagement, and support positive youth development.^{50,51} Given that athletes differ in their experience level and respond differently to various types of activities and instruction, it is essential to supporting athletes' skill development for coaches to consider the challenge level of activities and a balance of instruction versus allowing athletes to explore.⁵²

What It Looks Like in Practice

FINDING THE RIGHT LEVEL OF INTENSITY, CHALLENGE, AND FUN

- Coaches should consider how to make drills and activities both fun and competitive.
 - ➔ Create “just-right” challenges for athletes.
 - ➔ Use group check-ins to check the pulse of the group.
 - ➔ Offer players options to set their own pace.
 - ➔ Mix up competition to build resilience.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport:

➔ SCAFFOLD UP & DOWN

- Manageable patterns of stress build resilience. The process of building those skills requires stretching out of the comfort zone. Be proactive in recovering from that stretch by spending a short amount of time back in the comfort zone, ideally doing a patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity.

STRUCTURING PRACTICE

- Coaches should identify practice objectives and priorities.
- Coaches should be consistent in space setup so players know what to do and where to go.
- Coaches should include different components or types of activity to create a dynamic and effective practice.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners**From How to Coach Kids:****No Laps**

Exercise should never be a punishment.

No Lines

Do everything you can to keep them moving.

No Lectures

Keep instructions short and to the point.





Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Positive Coaching Alliance:

- ➔ Nine components of a dynamic practice:
 - **Preparation:** Plan practice ahead of time.
 - **Set-Up:** Arrive early to set up equipment.
 - **Opening Routine:** Consistent way to reinforce team culture.
 - **Warm Up:** Have athletes prepare body and mind.
 - **Activities:** Teach techniques, progress complexity.
 - **Scrimmage:** Let athletes play and apply their skills.
 - **Cool Down:** Prepare body and mind to transition out of practice.
 - **Closing Routine:** Debrief learning.
 - **Coach Reflection:** Reflect on areas for improvement.



What It Is

Situation-specific routines are intentional actions that coaches and athletes can use during practices, games, and competitions to support a range of goals. Some routines, like opening and closing reflections, provide a structure for athletes to transition in and out of practice or competitions, connect and reflect with each other, and celebrate. Other routines serve as in-the-moment tools to reinforce skills and mindsets, like using a pause routine to reset and focus or a creating a routine to celebrate mistakes as learning opportunities.

Why It Matters

When coaches consistently incorporate routines, they can reinforce a mastery climate, provide opportunities for athletes to build skills and strengthen their team cohesion.^{53,54} Consistent routines, like an opening and closing circle, can create a sense of predictability and provide time for transition and connection, which supports athlete safety and sense of belonging. Routines during practice that allow athletes to practice skills and reflect on their effort and growth can also reinforce skill building and a mastery climate.

What It Looks Like in Practice

RUNNING OPENING AND CLOSING ROUTINES

- Coaches can open and close practice with a team routine that can help athletes transition between practice/competitions and the rest of their day.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Positive Coaching Alliance:

- **Winner's circle:** The end of a game is a crucial time for a team because of the emotion generated by a competition. Right after a game is ideal for focusing on tank filling using a winner's circle. Get your players into a circle and open the floor for tank-filling comments. "Who noticed someone doing something to help our team today?" The coach generally speaks last, making sure to make comments about players who have not gotten tank filling from the others. End with a positive about the whole team.

- Include a routine to close out and celebrate the end of the season.
- Coaches should ensure their team ends the season on a positive note. This can include making the final practice a special one, celebrating progress toward goals, and sharing appreciation for teammates.

INCORPORATING ROUTINES THAT REINFORCE SKILLS AND MINDSETS

Coaches can reinforce skills and mindsets by taking these steps:

- Consistently practice routines that help athletes reset and focus, using them beyond high pressure or game-specific routines.
- Practice a mistakes routine to help frame mistakes as opportunities and remind athletes that mistakes are okay.



What It Is

Part of coaching is developing the skills to manage stress, stay grounded, and respond effectively in high-pressure situations. Managing stress can happen in the moment, like making decisions during an intense game or giving a postgame talk after a tough loss. It can also happen more proactively, like preparing for a difficult conversation with an athlete or improving time management. By building skills like self-awareness, emotion regulation, and communication, coaches are better equipped to engage with their athletes in a positive and meaningful way and can also model these skills as athletes develop their own skills. This practice can support other practices like building trust and relationships and fostering athlete safety.

Why It Matters

Managing stress effectively allows coaches to maintain a supportive and emotionally safe environment, even in high-pressure moments. When coaches model calm, thoughtful responses, they help athletes feel secure and teach critical skills like emotional regulation. This not only supports athlete development and performance but also reinforces trust, safety, and relationships within the team.^{55,56,57,58}

What It Looks Like in Practice

MANAGING STRESS AND EMOTIONS

- Acknowledge stress and use coping strategies.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners

LiFEsports.
at The Ohio State University



From LiFEsports at The Ohio State University and the Ohio High School Athletic Association:

→ **ACT** to complete the stress cycle:

- **A**cknowledge stress and use coping strategies to charge your battery

- **C**ommunicate

Interpersonal

- ▣ Clear is kind (Brown, 2018)
- ▣ Ask for help/support

Instructional

- ▣ What to do (technical aspect)
- ▣ How to do it (teaching-learning, modeling)
- ▣ When to do it (timing)

Group

- ▣ Re-focus on mastery
- ▣ Debrief by focusing on wins and “lessons” vs. wins and loses each game, match, etc.

- **T**ime management

- ▣ Use the Eisenhower matrix of important v not important and urgent v not urgent to manage priorities

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



UNITED STATES
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC
COMMITTEE

From the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC):

- ➔ Use the 6-second pause to interrupt knee-jerk reactions.
 - In preparation: Understand what is causing you to react.
 - In the moment: Use a pause strategy. (This takes practice!)
 - Take a deep breath.
 - Walk away (even if for a second).
 - Sit down.
 - Have something in your pocket that you touch as a reminder to stay calm.
 - Feel your feet on the floor.
 - Close your eyes and visualize the big picture.
 - Stretch.
 - Picture something in your mind that brings you peace.
 - Name what you're feeling either to yourself or someone else (name it and own it).
 - Picture the ripple. What do you want to ripple out?

- Incorporate ways to recenter and reset.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport:

- ➔ Engage in breathing practices.
- ➔ Have a reset routine.
- ➔ Let athletes call their own timeouts.
- ➔ Move your bodies.

ESTABLISHING CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITH COACHES, FAMILIES, AND LEAGUES

- Have open and clear lines of communication with all parties involved.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Girls on the Run International:

- ➔ **Coach Communication:** Establish a method of communication that works best for you and your coaching team.
- ➔ **Build Connections with Families:** Greet caregivers at pick-up and share a quick highlight from practice—this builds trust and keeps families informed.
- ➔ **Council/League Communication:** Get familiar with the point of contact at your council or league and stay connected throughout the season!



What It Is

Modeling means showing athletes what you want them to learn through your own actions. Coaches model every day—whether they’re aware of it or not—and they play a powerful role in shaping how athletes think, feel, and act. By demonstrating the behaviors, mindsets, and skills they want to see in their athletes, coaches help set the tone for the team. This might include showing how to manage emotions, focus on growth and effort, or respond to mistakes. When coaches hold themselves to the same standards they expect from their athletes, they build trust, reinforce shared values, and lay the groundwork for a positive team culture.

Why It Matters

Athletes often mirror the actions of their coaches. Coaches can intentionally model positive behaviors, prosocial and technical skills, and a mastery-orientation mindset to reinforce those same behaviors, skills, and mindsets in athletes—in their sport and beyond.^{59,60,61}

What It Looks Like in Practice

MODELING

- Coaches can model good decision making and talk through their decisions and how they align with their actions.
- Coaches can model expectations and behaviors they would like to see their athletes display.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From University of Washington Center for Leadership in Athletics (UW CLA):

- Emotional regulation:
 - Speaking respectfully with officials.
 - Showing sportsmanship after a big win.
 - Supporting an athlete after a mistake.
 - Speaking (not yelling!) with athletes after team rules are broken.
- Relationship skills:
 - Engaging respectfully with co-coaches.
 - Creating space to connect with every athlete.
 - Using inclusive language.
 - Connecting with opposing coaches.
 - Using clear and transparent communication.
- Healthy habits:
 - Getting sufficient rest.
 - Taking time to support your own mental health.
 - Fueling your body and ensuring proper nutrition.
 - Incorporating physical activity and training into your daily routine.

- When giving instruction, coaches can model by thinking about showing rather than simply telling.
- Coaches can narrate what they are doing as they do it.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- When coaches reflect on actions to examine their own behavior—by journaling, taking moments of mindfulness, sharing with other coaches—and use this as an opportunity to celebrate moments of being a great role model and also acknowledge missteps along the way, they are modeling accountability.
- Coaches can reinforce accountability by taking responsibility for their actions, particularly if they make a mistake or act in a way that is misaligned with team values.
- By apologizing for mistakes and missteps, coaches not only show athletes mistakes are okay but also build trust. They can support athletes in apologizing for their mistakes and missteps, too.
- Coaches should make admitting when they are wrong part of the team culture—something coaches and athletes do in a safe environment.



What It Is

When coaches engage in continuous learning, they are committing to their own development as a coach to better support the athletes they work with. This involves using what they are learning and adapting their coaching approach based on the needs of their athletes and team. Personal growth can take many forms, including participating in formal coach training on coaching practices or topic areas that are relevant to their athletes, as well as collaborating with fellow coaches and learning from shared experiences. It also includes learning in real time, observing what is and isn't working with the team, gathering feedback, and adapting accordingly. This also supports a mastery climate by modeling a focus on improvement.

Why It Matters

When coaches engage in continuous learning, feedback, and reflection, they can improve their effectiveness as coaches and their athletes' experiences. A range of topics affects the sport context, including teaching life skills, sportspersonship, fostering strong coach-athlete relationships, communicating effectively, and positive youth development.⁶² Ongoing development helps coaches be responsive to their athletes' needs, foster positive relationships, and model a mastery orientation.^{62,63,64}

What It Looks Like in Practice

ENGAGING IN CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Following are ways coaches can engage in continuous learning:

- Actively seek out and participate in learning opportunities to grow their coaching skills.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From Little League International:

- ➔ Get trained in coaching basics.
- ➔ Learn about coaching techniques to identify and prevent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.
- ➔ Utilize coaches resources and education tools.

- Participate in learning opportunities with other coaches in the league or community. For example:

- ➔ Observe other coaches' practices.
- ➔ Participate in leaguewide professional development.

SEEKING FEEDBACK AND ADAPTING

- Coaches should be intentional about getting feedback from a variety of sources—athletes, parents and caregivers, former athletes, and fellow coaches.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport:

- ➔ **Coach check:** Ask a co-coach to tell you what they noticed about your coaching and vice-versa. Progress to being able to check each other with care in the moment.

- Coaches can create a mechanism to solicit team feedback.
- Coaches can use feedback and team dynamics to adapt their coaching strategies and style.

Quick Tips from MCC Partners



From USA Weightlifting:

- ➔ Assessment
- ➔ Adjustment
- ➔ Be open to adapting coaching strategies and styles
- ➔ Seek to learn from youth athletes
- ➔ Collect feedback



Appendix A. About the MCC Implementation Study and the Development of This Guide

The [MCC implementation study](#) is an external effort led by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in collaboration with the MCC partner organizations. The study was designed to track coaches trained throughout the challenge and elevate lessons learned by partners along the way. The implementation study employs a mixed-methods approach and leverages multiple methods and data sources. A core component of the implementation study is a **comprehensive document review** of original training materials from ten MCC partner organizations including:

1. The Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport
2. Girls on the Run International
3. How to Coach Kids
4. LiFEsports at The Ohio State University and in partnership with the Ohio High School Athletic Association
5. Little League International
6. National Governing Bodies
7. Positive Coaching Alliance
8. The University of Washington Center for Leadership in Athletics
9. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee
10. The U.S. Soccer Foundation

How We Reviewed MCC Partner Trainings

To understand how coaches are being supported across the MCC, we conducted a structured review of original training materials from each MCC partner organization. Our goal was to see what coaches are being trained in, how the trainings are delivered, and how key concepts and practices show up across different programs.

Step 1: Getting to Know the Materials. We began with an initial scan of the materials provided by each partner. These included slide decks, facilitator guides, live and online session materials, and asynchronous course content. This early phase helped us get familiar with the types of content included in each training, how the trainings were structured and delivered, the goals and learning objectives behind each training, and the different ways MCC partner organizations engaged participants.

Even at this early stage, we noticed that partners were using different terms to describe the same ideas—or sometimes the same term to mean different things. This issue is known in research as the *jingle-jangle fallacy*,⁶⁵ and it's common in fields like coaching and youth development, where competencies and practices can be described in varied ways.^{66,67} Identifying this early helped us refine a set of questions for deeper analysis and led us to create a more structured way to capture information across the materials.

Step 2: Creating a Consistent Review Tool. To guide our review, we developed a document review form that allowed us to extract consistent information across trainings. The form was refined through several rounds of testing and revision. It was designed to capture answers to key questions, such as the following:

- **What adult learning strategies are used throughout the training?**
- **What coach and athlete competencies or practices are being addressed?**
- **Are research-based frameworks or evidence cited? If so, which ones?**

This approach reflects a basic principle of qualitative data collection—creating a shared frame for observation and interpretation while maintaining fidelity to the source material.

Step 3: Reviewing the Trainings. Two researchers led the full review of the training materials, with support from a third researcher and input from additional advisors. Our goal was to capture the trainings as faithfully as possible, preserving the language used by the partners themselves. This method—closer to transcription than summary—allowed us to honor the voices and design intentions of each partner organization.

Because people interpret training materials differently, we spent time building shared norms for using the review form. Initially, both reviewers completed the full form independently for each training, but we found it difficult to maintain consistency in the level of detail. We adapted by dividing the form: Each reviewer focused on specific sections across all trainings, allowing for more consistent data capture. Reviewers regularly checked in with each other to ensure alignment on the portions they did not complete themselves.

In total, we reviewed almost 40 distinct trainings from 10 MCC partner organizations. This process gave us a clear view of how the field is currently training coaches and created a strong foundation for understanding what's working well and what could be built on.

How We Analyzed the Training Materials

Once we completed the training reviews, our next step was to make sense of what we had gathered. This part of the process—coding and analysis—involved organizing and interpreting the data using well-established strategies from *constructivist grounded theory*.^{68,69,70,71,72} These methods are useful for helping to identify patterns, elevate themes, and ultimately understand what coaches are being trained to do when working with youth athletes. We used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to support this work.

Open Coding: Getting Into the Details. We started with *open coding*, which means we looked at the training content line by line and assigned codes—or labels—to anything that represented a concept, strategy, or skill. When possible, we used *in vivo* coding, meaning we used the exact words from the training materials instead of substituting our own. We also used *gerunds* (action words ending in -ing) to stay focused on what coaches are doing in practice.⁶⁹

Our goal was to code the training content at the “smallest grain size.” In other words, we wanted to capture the actual practices being taught, not just the broad categories they were grouped under. For example, if a training mentioned “emotion regulation” and described then strategies like “being aware of emotions,” “taking deep breaths,” or “engaging in conversations calmly,” we coded each strategy separately. These are specific and actionable practices, and starting with this level of detail gave us the flexibility to combine or aggregate later if needed. This approach resulted in a large number of initial codes—more than 600 in total—which gave us a rich foundation for deeper analysis.

Axial and Theoretical Coding: Connecting the Dots. After open coding, we moved into *axial coding*, where we began connecting the codes to one another and identifying broader categories and relationships between them. We used the *constant comparison* method during this phase,^{69,72} which means we regularly compared codes and examples across different trainings to surface patterns and similarities. Because many concepts in youth development overlap, we occasionally used *double coding* (applying more than one code to the same content), especially when a single strategy served multiple functions. We tried to limit this practice, but we used it where necessary to reflect the nuance and richness of the materials.

Finally, we conducted *exploratory theoretical coding* to consider whether the practice themes we identified aligned with established research or theory in coaching and youth development. This step helped us bridge what was happening in the trainings with what is known in the field. Throughout this entire process, we kept a detailed *codebook*—a document where we tracked all our codes, definitions, and decisions. This became especially helpful during axial coding and when we needed to revisit earlier decisions or make sure the whole team was interpreting the data in the same way.

How We Made Sense of the Findings Together

Although the AIR team worked to make meaning from the data through coding, we did not make sense of the data on our own. After our initial analysis, we shared early findings with MCC partners in person in May 2024. While we didn't formally ask for feedback at that time, many partners offered comments and reflections that we took into account as we continued our analysis. Later, in October 2024, we held a more structured *meaning-making* session with 23 people involved in the MCC. This session served as a *member check*—a process where researchers share interpretations with participants to ensure accuracy and to refine insights collaboratively.⁷³

During the session, we presented themes from the document review, and partners used Mentimeter, a real-time feedback tool, to react to the findings and offer their perspectives. This helped us bring multiple voices into the interpretation of the data. After the session, our team reviewed the partner feedback and adjusted our themes and interpretations where appropriate. This helped ensure that the analysis remained both rigorous and grounded in the lived experience of the MCC community.

What We Found: A Snapshot

Across all the trainings we reviewed, one thing was clear: MCC Partners are deeply focused on *coach practice*—that is, what coaches actually do when they're working with young people. The trainings typically built coaches' knowledge around *what* a given practice is, *why* it matters, and *how* to apply it in real-world settings. Most of the practices were framed in ways that made them usable across different contexts—they were not tied to any one sport, age group, or set of resources.

From this analysis, we identified **12 core practice areas** that appeared in most of the trainings—specifically, in at least one training from each of seven of the 10 MCC partners. **These 12 practice areas are the foundation for this guide.**

To identify these practices, we looked closely at the most specific and concrete strategies shared in the trainings—for example, things like “*taking a deep breath before responding*” or “*checking in with athletes individually*.” Rather than grouping those immediately under broader categories like “emotion regulation” or “relationship building,” we kept them separate so we could fully capture the range of what coaches are actually being asked to do. We chose to stay at that detailed level because it's easier to group strategies together than it is to pull them back apart once they've been lumped into a bigger category.

At the same time, many of the ideas we reviewed are overlapping and interconnected. The practices could have been grouped differently—and might, in fact, be organized differently in other coaching or youth development frameworks. What we present here reflects both (a) how these practices showed up in the MCC partner trainings and (b) our effort as researchers to group them thematically and theoretically. We aimed to stay as close as possible to the original intent of the training content while also making meaningful connections across partners' approaches.

This guide does not aim to replace MCC partner trainings. Instead, we hope it serves two main purposes:

- a. As an entry point** for coaches who are new to positive youth development and want a grounded understanding of what that looks like in practice.
- b. As a roadmap** to help coaches strengthen or reflect on their own approach over time.

We hope that the 12 practices outlined in this guide offer a shared language and foundation that coaches across the country can build from—whether they're just starting out or deepening their craft.

Appendix B: MCC Partner Trainings

The practices identified in this guide are drawn from a comprehensive document review of the following MCC partner trainings and online courses:

Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport

Healing Centered Sport

Sport-Based Youth Development

Girls on the Run International

National Coach Training 2.0

How to Coach Kids

Coaching Girls

How to Coach Kids

Little League International

Diamond Leader Training

USA Weightlifting (USA National Governing Body)

Coaching Fundamentals: Coaching Ethics and Philosophy

Coaching Fundamentals: Create a Culture of Belonging

Coaching Fundamentals: Effectively Coaching Generation Z

Coaching Fundamentals: Elevating Your Coaching IQ Module 2

LiFEsports at The Ohio State University in collaboration with the Ohio High School Athletic Association

Coach Beyond: Building a Community of Support

Coach Beyond: Developing Leaders

Coach Beyond: Improving Mental Strategies for Athletic Performance

Coach Beyond: Fostering a Positive Team Environment

Coach Beyond: Key Practice for Teaching Life Skills in Sport

Coach Beyond: Managing Stress and Pressure as Coaches

Coach Beyond: Promoting Positive Behavior & Engagement

Coach Beyond: Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Health

Positive Coaching Alliance

Coaching with Empathy

Culture, Practices, and Games

Developing Competitors and Mental Wellness Through Positive Coaching

Developing the Triple Impact Competitor

Double Goal Coach: Coaching for Winning and Life Lessons

Mastery: Coaching for Peak Performance

Positive Motivation: Getting the Best from Athletes

Sports Can Battle Racism

U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee

Connecting with Athletes

Making a Connection

Power of Presence

U.S. Soccer Foundation

Coach Mentor Training

Just Ball: Playmaker Training

Soccer for Success: Social Emotional Learning Afterschool

Soccer for Success: School Curriculum Training

The University of Washington Center for Leadership in Athletics

Developing Youth Through Sport

Adolescent Development: Centering Athlete Needs

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